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Does Intelligent Design Belong in the Classroom?

One of the most hotly debated topics in education in the last century is whether creationism (and/or “intelligent design”) or evolution or both should be taught in the science classroom. The debate has reached the Supreme Court level on several occasions and although there have been rulings in favor of each, the debate continues into the present day. I would argue that the debate is reaching its highest level yet with the growing number of “evangelical” Christians in America, the establishment of the Religious Right, advances in science, and advances in communication technology (i.e. the internet). In an educational setting, are intelligent design and evolution mutually exclusive? Is the teaching of intelligent design equivalent to the imparting of exclusively Christian morals and values? How does the philosophical shift from modernism to postmodernism play into the debate? If analyzed thoroughly, it becomes apparent that teaching intelligent design and evolution alongside one another in the classroom is feasible, perhaps even beneficial.

Two of the most common arguments against teaching intelligent design are that a) it has no scientific foundation and is therefore not “true” science, and b) it is inherently a religious – specifically Christian – theory and therefore violates the “separation of church and state” clause in the constitution. Let us peer deeper into these arguments.

If you were to overhear two people debating this topic, you might hear one of them saying, “but intelligent design isn’t really *science*,” emphasizing the word science

to imply that intelligent design has no scientific foundation. This is not necessarily true. First, a distinction must be made between *creationism* and *intelligent design*. *Creationism* is the belief in a literal account of the creation of the universe and its organisms as presented in the book of Genesis in the Bible. Not to be confused with creationism, *intelligent design* is the assertion that the universe and its organisms are a product of an intelligent cause or agent and not an unguided process such as evolution or natural selection. Although some would argue that intelligent design is only a thinly disguised version of creationism, it is not. Intelligent design does not rely on the Biblical account of creation; it relies instead on science and philosophy.

Intelligent design is a scientific theory, much like evolution is a scientific theory. You might now say, “okay, intelligent design could be considered a scientific theory, but it is still an overtly Christian belief.” Christianity does have a Creator at its center, but intelligent design is not limited to Christianity or even religion in general. Let me illustrate this. If you attended church on a Sunday when the preacher was preaching about the creation of the universe as revealed in Genesis, you would hear about how God created the universe and its organisms and how it relates to Christian faith and salvation. What you would be hearing is the *story* of creation and its role in the Christian’s life. You would not be hearing dry, scientific discussion about intelligent design and the evidence for or against evolution and natural selection. The teaching of intelligent design in the classroom does not mean an inherent imparting of Christian values, because intelligent design exists outside of Christianity, and intelligent design as a theory is much different than the Christian creation story.

Another argument against teaching intelligent design in the classroom is the “teach one, teach them all” argument. Those in support of this argument are

“accommodationists” because, “no constitutional violation occurs, from an accommodationist standpoint, if government aids all religions impartially.”¹ This school of thought says that if intelligent design is going to be taught in the classroom, then all other creation stories/theories should be taught as well, so as not to be exclusivist. This argument presupposes that intelligent design is a Christian belief, which we have already seen it is not. It says, if you’re going to teach the Christian tradition of the creation of the world in the classroom, then all traditions should be given equal time so the students don’t feel pressured into Christian beliefs. As I said, intelligent design is not an exclusively Christian theory.

This argument also fails in another way as well. The “teach one, teach them all” argument, if applied across the board in education, would be more of a burden than a blessing. For example, in a college classroom, a psychology professor may explain that there are several theories about the psychological growth process of children, but that there are two leading theories in the academic world that are receiving the most attention. Therefore, the class will study these two theories. If attention were paid to *all* of the theories, the students would not learn as much, so the professor chooses to limit the studies to the current two most prominent theories.

Similarly, in my own experience, I studied the religion of Islam in ninth grade in World Cultures class. We spent an extended period of time learning about this religion, because it is a very popular religion outside of the U.S. it is gaining popularity within the U.S., and it gives students more global perspective. “Religion in the Public School Curriculum: Questions and Answers,” says,

¹ Jelen, Ted. “In Defense of Religious Minimalism,” *Wall of Separation? Debating the Public Role of Religion*. Ed. Mary C Segers. Rowman & Littlefield, 1998.

because religion plays a significant role in history and society, study about religion is essential to understanding both the nation and the world. Omission of facts about religion can give students the false impression that the religious life of humankind is insignificant or unimportant.²

No student was taught that Islam was the “right” religion or that we should adhere to the morals of this particular religious tradition. We spent little, if any time, discussing other, less popular religions such as Buddhism, Sikhism, Zoroastrianism, Paganism, Shintoism, Taoism, Native American religion, etc (a side note: It is strange that those who argue for separation of church and state say nothing about the teaching of Islam in social studies classes. Perhaps this is because they know the value of students having a wide global perspective). So the “teach one, teach them all” does not really make sense.

My last point is more philosophical in nature. We are living in a strange time: a period of transition between modernity and postmodernity. Modernity, among other things, was marked by several ideas, including *analysis*, *secular science*, *objectivity* and *individualism*³. Postmodernity, then, can be seen as *post-analytical*, *post-secularly scientific*, *post-objective*, and *post-individualistic*. In modernity, if you “believe that you absolutely, objectively know the absolute, objective truth and you know this with absolute certainty, then of course you must debunk anyone who sees differently from you.”⁴ Postmodernity moves beyond this and says that truth can be found outside of what we, as moderns, might normally consider the only ways to find objective truth, i.e. science. While I realize that this is a very broad point, I believe thinking about how

² Originally quoted in “Core Issues for All Schools to Consider,” *First Amendment in Schools: A Guide from the First Amendment Center* by Haynes, Chaltain, Ferguson, Hudson, Thomas. Ass. for Supervision & Curriculum Development, 2003.

³ For a more in depth (although still slightly oversimplified) explanation of modernity and postmodernity, see *A New Kind of Christian* by Brian McLaren, pp. 11-20, (Jossey-Bass 2001).

⁴ *Ibid.*, p.17

postmodernity will affect our thinking regarding education – even the intelligent design v. evolution debate – will prove to be fruitful.

Sir John Templeton once said, “Would it not be strange if a universe without purpose accidentally created humans who are so obsessed with purpose?” His position on the creation of the world aside, he strikes a chord and makes us wonder what our purpose really is. I believe our purpose as educators is to give students a broad range of knowledge from many different fields without indoctrinating them with religion, as the first amendment to the constitution commands. We can see, now, that the teaching of intelligent design alongside evolution is in fact not a violation of “separation of church and state,” but rather a teaching of two distinct theories on the creation of the universe and its organisms, including us humans – who are still trying to figure the whole thing out.